

Indiana Department of Education

The Role of High School Guidance in Raising Student Achievement



Grant Proposal for High School Guidance Initiative

November 2006

Purpose

It is an often overlooked fact that elementary and secondary school counselors can significantly impact student achievement, retention and behavior in schools. Research conducted by Borders and Drury (1992) found that school counseling interventions have a substantial impact on student's educational and personal development. Studies of a five-year dropout prevention by Kaufman, Klein and Frase (1999) showed that counseling services were on one of the key elements of promising dropout prevention initiatives. Many other studies point to similar correlations between effective school counseling programs and student success.

These studies also highlight a common and widespread reality that school counselor numbers are severely limited (most elementary schools in Indiana do not have school counselors) and that those who do work in schools are overloaded. The average student to counselor ratio in Indiana is 560 students to 1 counselor, the eighth largest ratio in the country, well above the American School Counselor Association's recommendation of 250-1.

An Indiana study of school counselor's time use found that almost a third of a counselor's time is spent doing clerical work that takes them away from face-to-face contact with students.

With tight budgets, high caseloads and significant time, material and human resource limitations, school counselors must begin using research-based, replicable school counseling interventions that are proven to be effective. And schools must find creative ways to ensure that counselors are spending more of their time with students instead of completing non-counseling, clerical tasks. Both pieces must be in place in order to ensure that school counselor effectiveness in improving student achievement and retention is maximized.

The project proposed below rests on the following fundamental beliefs:

1. School counselors make a significant impact on student achievement, retention and readiness for postsecondary education and training.
2. Because of high student-to-counselor ratios, slim budgets and overwhelming schedules, school counselors must concentrate on using research-based practices and evidence-based interventions proven to positively affect student achievement, retention and readiness.
3. Providing opportunities for school counselors to spend more face-to-face time with struggling students will have a positive impact on student success, lines of communication with parents and more positive relationships with students.

Finding ways to allow school counselors to use more of their time to implement effective school counseling interventions is the primary purpose of this project.

Structure

To address the issues outlined above, this project proposes a two-tiered pilot project with Indiana high schools.

In the first tier, five research-based school counseling interventions are identified and seven high schools are selected to pilot the interventions. Researchers will measure the effectiveness of the interventions to increase student academic achievement and retention by using qualitative and quantitative data. Only standardized, replicable and effective school counseling interventions as identified by the University of Massachusetts Center for School Counseling Outcome Research will be used.

Concurrently, the second tier identifies a part-time individual to alleviate some of the clerical tasks of the school counselor, thus allowing the counselor more time to implement the targeted interventions. Ongoing qualitative and quantitative research will be conducted throughout the life of the project to determine the effectiveness of the school counseling interventions.

It is anticipated that upon completion of this project that the process will show a positive perceptual and statistical impact on student achievement and retention by allocating more of a school counselors time to specific research-based counseling interventions.

If successful, this project enters a second phase intended to broaden the capacity of this program to significantly impact student achievement and retention across the state of Indiana. School counselors will be shown the proven impact of using targeted, research-based interventions and will be led in discussions of ways to restructure their roles and responsibilities. Statewide information and “train the trainer” workshops, provided by the Indiana Department of Education, will expand the reach of this project by informing counselors, teachers, school administrators, parents and students of the results that can be achieved and importance of reorganizing school counselor responsibilities and tasks. Administrators and other school leaders will be shown the impact of rethinking how they designate school responsibilities. It is hoped, by doing this, members of the entire school community; parents, teachers, administrators, business partners, and community organizations, will learn ways to share the responsibility of positively impacting student achievement.

Identified Strategies

The process of selecting the Indiana high schools to participate in the pilot study begins. At least half of the schools selected will be schools identified as exploring high school redesign models. A university research group will also be selected to design and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions in each of the participating schools.

At the same time, work will conclude on identifying the five research-based counseling strategies to be used in the pilot study. One school counselor and one administrator from each pilot school will be identified to receive materials and training in the interventions and reasoning behind the project. School counselors will receive individualized training in the school counselor interventions. Administrators must commit to half-day training on rethinking the role of school counselors.

The part-time “school specialist” will work in the school’s guidance and counseling office. Through arrangements made with the school counselor point person at each school, the school specialist will assume specific non-counseling, clerical duties of the counselor on a weekly basis. These arrangements must allow the school counselor point person to have a minimum of three hours per week available to personally implement the targeted school counselor interventions in each school.

Steps for the program includes:

STEP 1: Identify a research group that will conduct and evaluate this program over the course of the project.
STEP 2: Identify five research-based, replicable school counseling interventions proven to improve student achievement and retention.
STEP 3: Issue a call for participation from high schools wishing to participate in this pilot program.
STEP 4: Using criteria developed in collaboration with the selected research group and the Indiana Department of Education, select high schools to participate in the project. Selection criteria will include school size, geographic location, student social economic status, population diversity, and academic achievement as measured by ISTEP scores.
STEP 5: Contact participating schools and schedule information and training session for counselors and principals.
STEP 6: Conduct statewide training of school personnel in the identified interventions. Provide materials and protocols for implanting the interventions.
STEP 7: Schools work with identified research group to begin implementation of program.
STEP 8: Interventions wrap-up and evaluation conducted by research group.

The parameters of this project were carefully chosen so as to enhance the possibility that this project will be replicated in many other schools.

The use of standardized, research-based school counseling interventions increases the chances that the program will be successfully completed in other schools, with similar results.

Issues

In every school there are inherent beliefs which sometimes are called traditions or “the way we do it here” paradigms. These beliefs are real and often become the “issues” which impede change. Moving a guidance belief system to a focus on support of student engagement rather than time spent on scheduling of classes, could create issues which threaten current beliefs about guidance services. This change of structure could also refocus some finances and staffing assignments. Here are some of the barriers which might create issues toward the redefinition of high school guidance services.

- **Time-**A redefinition in the use of time from scheduling to developing, educating and implementing support programs.
- **Middle School Involvement-** The development of early warning systems which begin in the 8th grade to identify struggling learners requires time spent collaborating and working with students and staff at the middle level.
- **Guidance Services-** Refocus services to develop and implement the development of summer support programs which might include tutoring, summer school courses and remediation programs for struggling learners as well as the accelerated learner.
- **Course Recommendations-** Guidance personnel would now develop concurrent grade –level support programs not for remediation but support of courses which allows students sufficient time over four years to complete a college sequenced course outline. Course recommendations would be focused on the individual needs of the students not necessarily based on the four year planned sequence. Students would take courses as they were both prepared and able to complete. No longer would a student be “moved along” into the next level just to support the sequence established for those students who were able to meet and complete courses as previously determined. Courses would be selected not for remediation purposes but for preparation purposes.
- **Career and Post Secondary Education-** The role of the guidance department would take the responsibility of educating and supporting exploration and definition of career and post secondary learning experiences. Individual students would be provided ample opportunities to learn and explore varied advanced learning experiences. Parents would also be involved in these experiences and part of an on-going education process to better define and clarify options for the future.
- **Drop Outs-** Even though guidance currently knows the students who might be identified as potential drop outs, the role of the guidance department would be responsible for identification and intervention in keeping even the struggling student in high school. The measure of successful intervention programs would be directly correlated to the percentage of yearly drop outs and graduation rates.
- **Financial Alignment-** It would be expected that funding might be changed to accommodate for the additional skills needed for clerical assistance. The clerical staff would be more focused on scheduling rather than general secretarial duties. Some additional training would be required and expected.
- **Clerical Services-** The current secretarial services provided would need to be redefined more toward an administrative assistant role. This individual or individuals would be critical to the success of maintaining schedules, transcripts and records for all students.
- **Training of Students-** There would be a need to train students in a process which allows the individual student to input and select courses with minimal assistance. This process could include a soft ware program that allows individual students to access and input requests either at school based computer labs or at their home with the assistance of parents. The training would need to include teacher, aide and parent understanding. This in turn would require guidance to provide training sessions for all groups to be involved. After the first year of initial training, recurring sessions would be provided as updates are needed. The impetus of inputting request of courses and the sequence of courses to be taken

would involve a more clear understanding of options of courses and requirements established to encourage rigorous courses to be selected.

- **Educating Parents-** One of the larger expectations of redefinition of guidance services would be to include on-going training sessions for parents. These sessions would include technology training for assisting students in selection and inputting of course requests, accessing grades, updating parents on college and career options, updating parents on specific strategies which support struggling learners specifically in reading, math and English and other academic changes that occur within a school. These training or education sessions would become part of the culture of the school community. Including parents in the process broadens and deepens the ownership and connectedness to the school and eventually to the future of the student.

